

COASTAL CONSERVANCY

Staff Recommendation

February 3, 2006

MENDOCINO INTERACTIVE UNDERWATER PROGRAM

File No. 05-199

Project Manager: Sheila Semans

RECOMMENDED ACTION: Authorization to disburse up to \$56,000 to the State Department of Parks and Recreation to purchase equipment for the Mendocino Interactive Underwater Program.

LOCATION: Mendocino County

PROGRAM CATEGORY: Integrated Coastal and Marine Resource Protection

EXHIBITS

Exhibit 1: Project Location Map

Exhibit 2: Letters of Support

RESOLUTION AND FINDINGS:

Staff recommends that the State Coastal Conservancy adopt the following resolution pursuant to Section 31220 of the Public Resources Code:

“The State Coastal Conservancy hereby authorizes disbursement to the State Department of Parks and Recreation (DPR) of an amount not to exceed fifty-six thousand dollars (\$56,000) to purchase equipment for the Mendocino Interactive Underwater Program, subject to the following conditions:

1. Prior to the disbursement of any funds, DPR shall submit for the review and approval of the Executive Officer of the Conservancy:
 - a. A work program, budget and schedule, and the names of any contractors to be employed in carrying out the work.
 - b. Evidence that all necessary permits and approvals have been obtained.
 - c. A signing plan for the project acknowledging Conservancy participation.
2. DPR has provided assurances that adequate staffing has been assigned to this project and all the funds necessary to implement the project for no less than 3 years have been secured.”

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Staff further recommends that the Conservancy adopt the following findings:

“Based on the accompanying staff report and attached exhibits, the State Coastal Conservancy hereby finds that:

1. The proposed project is consistent with Chapter 5.5 of the Public Resources Code (Section 31220), regarding the Conservancy’s authority to protect and restore marine resources.
2. The proposed project is consistent with the Conservancy’s Project Selection Criteria and Guidelines adopted by the Conservancy on January 24, 2001.”

PROJECT SUMMARY:

Staff recommends that the Conservancy authorize disbursement of up to \$56,000 to the State Department of Parks and Recreation (DPR) to purchase equipment for the Mendocino Interactive Underwater Program (IUP). The IUP seeks to provide everyone, regardless of age, physical ability, or financial means, with a learning experience of the underwater coastal nearshore environment, while reinforcing the necessity to protect our coastal and marine habitats.

The proposed project will allow DPR to purchase a closed-circuit underwater video system and helmet-mounted camera to be used in an interactive, real-time interpretive program in Mendocino County. Cables will link a diver to an on-land TV monitor to provide 2-way communication with participants onshore. Park naturalists and intern marine scientists will assist the public to discover the underwater realm many will be seeing live for the first time. The camera-equipped diver will move from the intertidal to the subtidal zone, answering questions and providing information on sea life, kelp forests, ocean safety, and how to care for our coastlines and marine environment. IUP equipment is portable and can also be used for more directed learning, with high school and community college classes.

DPR in Mendocino County manages some of the richest tidal resources in California: eleven coastal parks and five underwater parks. Thousands of submerged acres in the underwater parks conceal wrecked ships, rare geological formations, Native American archaeological sites, remnants of the logging industry in the 1800’s, and abundant marine flora and fauna. DPR has chosen MacKerricher State Park as IUP’s primary location because of the large annual attendance and an ADA-compliant boardwalk. Reserve America recently listed MacKerricher in the nation’s top 100 family campgrounds, and in the top five of the nation’s park beaches. Stretching seven miles along the Pacific Ocean, this richly varied 2500-acre park boasts of headlands, coastal pines, grasslands, living sand dunes, rocky bluffs, beaches, a lake, the only coastal fen in California and a 454-acre underwater park.

Public fascination with the tidepools along the coast has often resulted in damage to these fragile ecosystems. By offering formal, docent-led tours of intertidal areas, IUP will allow for more controlled management of these habitats, and access can be rotated to allow for regeneration. DPR is also partnering with the College of the Redwoods Marine Science and Technology program to utilize the IUP to begin basic research on the underwater parks within DPR jurisdiction. This research will provide the students with a unique educational opportunity, and help DPR evaluate and monitor the health of the resources. Due to staffing issues, DPR has no other way of monitoring their underwater parks at this time.

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The IUP will also provide an extraordinary opportunity for younger school children to learn about the nearshore environment. DPR conservatively estimates that the K-9 participation in the MacKerricher State Park Interpretive Program alone will more than double if the IUP is included, reaching up to 4,000 children per field season. This program serves inland counties, including, Lake and Trinity Counties, as well as Mendocino County. The IUP will also provide high school students with a more advanced opportunity to study marine science and oceanography by offering a more focused curriculum and an opportunity to investigate subtidal habitats in real-time.

Educating the public about biological communities, habitats, ecosystems and processes, and the values they provide to our communities is one of the key ways we can protect these resources into the future. IUP would provide the public with an opportunity to witness in real-time the complex underwater communities located right offshore that remain a mystery to most people.

Site Description:

This project is intended to take place initially along the Mendocino County coast (Exhibit 1), but the equipment purchased will be portable, and can be used anywhere in the state. The focus of the interpretive program will be the intertidal and subtidal zones of the nearshore environment.

DPR began designating underwater parks in 1960 and the Mendocino District alone now has five parks within its jurisdiction: MacKerricher, Point Cabrillo, Russian Gulch, Van Damme and Manchester. There is currently no budget to manage or monitor these parks, and the proposed project would allow for an informal monitoring of these natural resources. It is the DPR's intent, should funding become available, to expand this program to include more formal monitoring of these underwater parks.

Project History:

The Conservancy has been working to provide public access to and interpretation of the coast in Mendocino County for over two decades. However, no project has yet been funded that focused on the marine environment, and provided public education and interpretation of our ocean resources. It is a logical extension of the Conservancy's access, education, and marine programs to fund projects that provide for a real-time, interactive experience with these unique habitats.

PROJECT FINANCING:

Coastal Conservancy	\$56,000
Department of Parks and Recreation	30,000
Community Foundation of Mendocino County	6,500
CA State Parks Foundation	<u>5,000</u>
Total Project Cost	\$97,500

The expected source of funds for this project is the FY 03/04 appropriation to the Conservancy from the Water Security, Clean Drinking Water, Coastal and Beach Protection Act of 2002 (Proposition 50). Proposition 50 authorizes the use of a small portion of the bond funds for development of facilities to promote public access to and participation in the conservation of land, water, and wildlife resources (Water Code section 79571(b)). Eligible projects under section 79571 include both research facilities for watershed protection and conservation and nature centers that are in or adjacent to watersheds and wetlands and provide wildlife viewing, outdoor experiences, and conservation education programs. Funding priority is to be given to

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nature center projects operated by a nonprofit organization that provides educational opportunities to children from urban areas that lack access to such opportunities. *Id.*

Consistent with these requirements, the IUP will provide facilities for research and education, focusing initial efforts on the nearshore environment adjacent to the Noyo watershed. The research will provide students with a unique educational opportunity, and help DPR evaluate and monitor the health of the resources.

CONSISTENCY WITH CONSERVANCY'S ENABLING LEGISLATION:

This project will be undertaken pursuant to Chapter 5.5 of Division 21 of the Public Resources Code which allows the Conservancy to carry out projects that protect and/or restore marine habitat. Under Section 31220 (b) the Conservancy may undertake projects that provide for public access compatible with resource protection and restoration objectives or provide for the construction or expansion of nature centers or research facilities that emphasize conservation education or research activities focusing on the marine portion of the coastal zone or the land and ocean interface. Consistent with this section, the proposed project will (1) provide for remote public access to DPR's underwater parks, safely exposing people to the unique environments of the rocky intertidal and subtidal areas of Mendocino County; and (2) provide for the purchase of equipment to expand DPR's marine interpretive program. This equipment will be used interactively with the public to provide real-time access to, and education about, the coastal nearshore environment, and in cooperation with the College of the Redwoods' Marine Science Technology Program to promote research and conservation of the fragile intertidal and subtidal environments.

As required by Section 31220(c), the project will include an evaluation component through the preparation and submittal of a year-end report by DPR on the activities, accomplishments, and future goals of the Interpretive Underwater Program. The Year 1 report will also include a qualitative assessment of the nearshore underwater parks, and formulate a formal monitoring program for the submerged parks under DPR's jurisdiction. As also required by this section, the project is consistent with available state and regional watershed plans as described below under "Consistency with Local Watershed Management Plan/State Water Quality Control Plan."

CONSISTENCY WITH CONSERVANCY'S STRATEGIC PLAN GOAL(S) & OBJECTIVE(S):

Consistent with **Goal 2 Objective B**, the proposed project will open up mostly inaccessible habitats for the purpose of public education. The interpretive program is well suited to meet the needs of people with physical limitations.

Consistent with **Goal 2 Objective D**, the proposed project will increase coastal recreational opportunities by providing real-time, remote access to the nearshore subtidal environment and will enhance the Department of Parks and Recreation's marine interpretive program.

**CONSISTENCY WITH CONSERVANCY'S
PROJECT SELECTION CRITERIA & GUIDELINES:**

The proposed project is consistent with the Conservancy's Project Selection Criteria and Guidelines adopted January 24, 2001, in the following respects:

Required Criteria

1. **Promotion of the Conservancy's statutory programs and purposes:** See the "Consistency with Conservancy's Enabling Legislation" section above.
2. **Consistency with purposes of the funding source:** See the "Project Financing" section above.
3. **Support of the public:** The project is supported by local legislators, the College of the Redwoods, and non-governmental organizations. Letters of support are attached as Exhibit 2.
4. **Location:** The proposed project would be located within the coastal zone of Mendocino County, with the option of expansion north and south along the coast.
5. **Need:** There is a general need for interactive, educational opportunities in our nearshore coastal environments for people of all ages and physical abilities. The IUP will provide anyone the opportunity to learn about a critical habitat that is otherwise largely inaccessible to the public. Furthermore, DPR has numerous underwater parks in their jurisdiction without the means or staff to monitor or assess their health. The proposed project will allow for regular, informal monitoring of the underwater parks that, with additional funding, could lead to a formal monitoring and enhancement program for these resources.
6. **Greater-than-local interest:** The Mendocino coast is well known for its magnificent coastline and wealth of natural resources, making it an ideal place for a nearshore interpretive program. For the MacKerricher State Park Interpretive Program alone, DPR estimates that the IUP will include at least 4,000 school children (serving schools in surrounding inland counties as well) and increase general public participation to over 6,000 participants per field season. Furthermore, these nearshore coastal environments are the most impacted by human use and yet little of this impact is understood or quantified. Research conducted by DPR and College of the Redwoods will benefit residents and visitors alike.

Additional Criteria

7. **Resolution of more than one issue:** The proposed project will provide an interactive educational opportunity for the public to experience the intertidal and subtidal environments, most of which are inaccessible. While providing this unique, controlled educational experience through docent-led tours, pressure on tidepools will be lessened and opportunities for enhancement will be identified.
8. **Leverage:** See the "Project Financing" section above.
9. **Innovation:** The IUP will utilize state-of-the-art equipment to provide real-time interaction from land with the diver in the water. The IUP will employ a closed-circuit underwater video system with a microphone and camera mounted on the diver's helmet. Cables will link

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the diver to an on land TV monitor with a microphone feedback to the diver. All sessions will be recorded and provided to schools for additional educational activities.

10. **Readiness:** DPR has secured all other funding and had begun to purchase some equipment. Without additional funding, the program cannot begin in 2006.

11. **Cooperation:** DPR will work closely with coastal and inland counties to get as many classes as possible to participate in this program. Furthermore, DPR has already begun working with the College of the Redwoods' Marine Technology Program to incorporate IUP into the curriculum. DPR Mendocino District will also work with other districts to lend or replicate this program along the coast of California.

CONSISTENCY WITH LOCAL COASTAL PROGRAM POLICIES:

The proposed project is consistent with the Mendocino County Local Coastal Program certified in 1992. It is consistent with the Coastal Element of the Mendocino County General Plan as follows:

Section 30213 (Part). Lower cost visitor and recreational facilities...shall be protected, encouraged, and, where feasible, provided. Developments providing public recreational opportunities are preferred. The proposed project will provide equipment to offer a no-cost educational opportunity to visitors, residents and school kids.

Section 30230 (Part). Uses of the marine environment shall be carried out in a manner that will sustain the biological productivity of coastal waters and that will maintain healthy populations of all species of marine organisms adequate for long-term commercial, recreational, scientific, and educational purposes. The IUP will provide for a more controlled recreational and educational experience with the intertidal and subtidal habitats of the Mendocino coastline, and will lessen thereby lessen the often unintended negative impacts on these fragile environments.

CONSISTENCY WITH LOCAL WATERSHED MANAGEMENT PLAN/ STATE WATER QUALITY CONTROL PLAN:

The IUP will also support the efforts outlined in the Watershed Planning Chapter of the North Coast Regional Water Quality Control Board's Watershed Management Initiative Document. While not focusing specifically on nearshore impacts, this document recognizes that;

“[A]ddressing the ocean and near shore areas not included in harbors or bays in individual Watershed Management Areas is necessary. It is recognized that near shore areas may be affected by land-based activities in specific watersheds. The Regional Water Board will attempt to determine the extent to which land-based activities are affecting ocean resources when data indicate ocean impacts.”

The IUP will help assess those impacts on the nearshore environment, and provide any relevant data to the Regional Water Board for consideration.

COMPLIANCE WITH CEQA:

The proposed project is categorically exempt from review under the California Environmental Quality Act (CEQA), pursuant to 14 Cal. Code of Regulations Section 15306, which exempts

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data collection, research, experimental management, and resource evaluation activities which do not result in a serious or major disturbance to an environmental resource. IUP will be used to improve management of the fragile nearshore environments within the state parks system on an experimental basis. The proposed project activities will not result in disturbance to the nearshore marine environment or its wildlife and the information gathered will be used for further evaluation of the resource. The site where children and adults will be viewing the real-time underwater video is currently used for public access and is exempt under 14 Cal. Code of Regulations 15322, regarding the adoption of educational or training programs which involve no physical alteration in the area affected or which involve physical changes only in the interior of existing training structures. Staff will file a Notice of Exemption upon approval.